

Melanie DeVito
Testimony before the Labor and Public Employees Committee of the
Connecticut General Assembly
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Senator Winfield, Representative Tercyak, and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. My name is Melanie DeVito. I've worked as a Probate Court Officer in the Central CT Regional Children's Probate Court for almost 9 years. I'm in **support of HB 5860: AN ACT RECOGNIZING PROBATE COURT EMPLOYEES AS STATE EMPLOYEES**. This legislation is long overdue in giving me and my coworkers the job security and voice at work that probate employees deserve.

Following the consolidation of the probate court system, three years ago now, I signed a union card because my coworkers and I thought we deserved better. We had not had a raise for several years, had lost one week's vacation as the probate courts consolidated and lost our paid lunch hour as we continued to pay more than twice what real state employees paid for the same health insurance benefits. We had nowhere to turn and no voice to be heard. A salary study was conducted at that time and compared us to workers in Tennessee and therefore our salaries (which are considerably lower for similar work as state employees) were not adjusted. Again we had no voice to discuss our concerns or objections.

Since we signed union cards, we have finally had a cost of living and merit raise. Most recently, the Probate Court Budget Committee initiated yet another wage study. I am sure this was not a coincidence.

This most recent study confirmed what those of us who signed union cards three years ago knew then: that probate court employees are paid less than state employees for similar responsibilities.

As a Probate Court Officer I am expected to sort through and help to find resolutions for some of the most difficult family situations involving children. I conduct family case conferences with parents, family members, attorneys, the Department of Children and Families, and other professionals that may be involved in the case. I assist the parties in negotiating with one another to help seek the best outcomes for the children we are entrusted to determine their best interest. We then make a recommendation to the Judge as to what we believe to be in the best interest of the child. These are not easy matters. They involve both a working knowledge of the law, as well as an understanding of child development, family dynamics, the parent's mental health and or substance abuse issues, the needs of the proposed guardians and ultimately the clinical judgment to make sound recommendations concerning all parties involved. This is the type of job that you cannot leave at work and shut off, it stays with you.

For this I think we deserve the right to participate in the negotiating of the benefits and issues that affect us directly rather than having a budget committee of three judges determining this. We are not here looking for a pay raise or other big, expensive benefits. We are looking for the right to make a decision about our own lives: do we want to be able to bargain collectively or not. I hope that this committee will give us the right to make that decision.